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Margot Edwards

Massey University, M.F.Edwards@massey.ac.nz

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Cow Going Abstract – Get It While It's Hot!!

Margot Edwards

Massey University

This play *Cow Going Abstract* came onto my radar exactly 98 days too late to help me in my time of need! And even then, after it was carefully handed to me, I am ashamed to say, that it languished in my brief case for three weeks whilst I marked my final assessments for the semester. As it happened, not reading that play was a bad mistake, but as Schecky the duck would say, "get over it"!

It's been a very tough semester. My beloved Sport in Society course was moved out of the College of Business into the College of Sport. (Yes, I know I don't own the course, but I invested a lot of energy and passion developing it over 10 years and had expert knowledge and networks that were valuable to my students.) I could make the change and move to the School of Sport, away from my mentors and artfully minded colleagues, or I could stay and teach a new course, a philosophically enlightened journey through the key concepts of leadership as championed by Donna Ladkin in her 2010 book, *Rethinking Leadership*. Reading *Cow Going Abstract* would have helped me balance up my own negative voice/imposter syndrome (aka Jimmy) with "Faith" in my teaching experience and ability to create new learning opportunities. I was the instructor for this class for the first time this year and certainly needed Schecky beside me urging me on "Ba-duh, bum".

The ideas captured in the play would also be beneficial to my students, many of whom had difficulty completing a Reflective Journal for their final assessment. Like Alison the Cow before her sojourn abroad, many of my students were unwilling to step outside their comfort zones and became entangled in "this is how we write in management!" So writing styles, missing opportunities to dig deeper into current or past situations and expose the Jimmies they had encountered earlier in their lives and still carried in their hearts and heads would have assisted them with this intensely personal assignment. Perhaps if the students had seen Lichtenstein's *Cow Going Abstract* triptych, the inspiration for the play title, they would have understood the deconstructive intentions of the assignment.

Faith the Elephant's wise adage that, "it's the looking that matters more than the finding", was exactly the quality that determined the final grade of the Reflective Journal. The struggle, the unravelling, the pulling to bits, the wrestling with difficult concepts and attempting to elucidate new ways of thinking, as Faith would argue, is more important than "getting it right" or feeding the lecturer the words that she or he wants to read just to get a passing grade. This play would have provided the students with exactly the right cues to raise the more important quest for answers, of searching for explanations, and to step away from their busy "doing" lives to think about the bigger questions – what is it all about and why are we here? Certainly the play provides a very real mechanism to help them visualize and articulate the voices they perceive as they understand and change their lives.

The play creates a wonderful dialogue about uncertainty, and whilst I acknowledge that this is a key issue with which we all struggle throughout our entire lives, it is particularly important for vulnerable young people at a time when they complete their degree, armed with bag loads of theories and freshly pressed interview clothes, as they begin to search for positions in the tight job market. My son, an emerging artist, has been searching for his reason d'être since he graduated a year ago with a Visual Arts degree. Soon after graduation he began working on several paintings in earnest but the loneliness of studio life deflated him and he quit painting and found a job with a landscaping company. He has spent the last year digging holes and shifting huge quantities of gravel in a large contractor's barrow – and although Jimmy would be impressed by the thick calluses on his hands, my son felt ashamed that he had become a human machine. "Barrow boy" began to lose sleep (no jokes please Schecky, this is serious), he began to lose sight of the possibilities that the future might hold, and the more he worked the less he felt like looking for his "chocolate" and finding his contribution. Fortunately, when I step back and look at my son, as if he were a character in *Cow Going Abstract*, I can see he has a Schecky (his mate Luke), a Faith (his Dad) and a Doubt (me – damn it!); he just needs to find Tenacity, give Jimmy the boot, and aim true!

Next year I am going to use this play in my leadership class as Lesson Number One – it fits neatly alongside Ladkin's philosophical discussions. And I am taking the play home to read through with my son! Thank you, for providing such an entertaining and practical tool.